

The Black-and-White World of Walter Ashby Plecker

By WARREN FISKE, The Virginian-Pilot © August 18, 2004

Lacy Branham Hearl closes her eyes and travels eight decades back to what began as a sweet childhood.

There was family everywhere: her parents, five siblings, nine sets of adoring aunts and uncles and more cousins than she could count. They all lived in a Monacan Indian settlement near Amherst, their threadbare homes circling apple orchards at the foot of Tobacco Row Mountain.

As Hearl grew, however, she sensed the adults were engulfed in deepening despair. When she was 12, an uncle gathered his family and left Virginia, never to see her again. Other relatives scattered in rapid succession, some muttering the name "Plecker."

Soon, only Hearl's immediate family remained. Then the orchards began to close because there were not enough workers and the townspeople turned their backs and all that was left was prejudice and plight and Plecker.

Hearl shakes her head sadly.

"I thought Plecker was a devil," she says. "Still do."

Walter Ashby Plecker was the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, which records births, marriages and deaths. He accepted the job in 1912. For the next 34 years, he led the effort to purify the white race in Virginia by forcing Indians and other nonwhites to classify themselves as blacks. It amounted to bureaucratic genocide.

He worked with a vengeance.



Walter Ashby Plecker, the first registrar of Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics, starting in 1912, forced Indians to classify themselves as black. The tribes, he said, had become a "mongrel" mixture. Courtesy Richmond Times-Dispatch

Plecker was a white supremacist and a zealous advocate of eugenics – a now discredited movement to preserve the integrity of white blood by preventing interracial breeding.

"Unless this can be done," he once wrote, "we have little to hope for, but may expect in the future decline or complete destruction of our civilization."

Plecker's icy efficiency as racial gatekeeper drew international attention, including that of Nazi Germany. In 1943, he boasted: "Hitler's genealogical study of the Jews is not more complete."

Plecker retired in 1946 at the age of 85 and died the following year. The damage lives on.

From the grave, Plecker is frustrating the efforts of Virginia tribes to win federal recognition and a trove of accompanying grants for housing, health care and education. One of the

requirements is that the tribes prove their continuous existence since 1900. Plecker, by purging Indians as a race, has made that nearly impossible. Six Virginia tribes are seeking the permission of Congress to bypass the requirement.

"It never seems to end with this guy," said Kenneth Adams, chief of the Upper Mattaponi. "You wonder how anyone could be so consumed with hate."

It's likely that Plecker didn't see himself as the least bit hateful. Had he not been so personally aloof, he might have explained that he believed he was practicing good science and religion. Perhaps he would have acknowledged that he was influenced by his own heritage.

Walter Plecker was one of the last sons of the Old South. He was born in Augusta County on April 2, 1861. Ten days later, the cannons at Fort Sumter sounded the start of the Civil War. His father, a prosperous merchant and slave owner, left home to fight for the Confederate Army with many of his kin.

Some 60 years later, Plecker would recall his early days in a letter to a magazine editor expressing his abhorrence of interracial breeding. He remembered "being largely under the control" of a "faithful" slave named Delia. When the war ended, she stayed on as a servant. The Pleckers were so fond of her that they let her get married in their house. When Plecker's mother died in 1915, it was Delia "who closed her eyes," he wrote.

Then Plecker got to his point. "As much as we held in esteem individual negroes this esteem was not of a character that would tolerate marriage with them, though as we know now to our sorrow much illegitimate mixture has occurred." Plecker added, "If you desire to do the correct thing for the negro race ... inspire (them) with the thought that the birth of mulatto children is a standing disgrace."

Plecker graduated from Hoover Military Academy in Staunton in 1880. He became a doctor, graduating from the University of Maryland's medical school in 1885. He moved around western Virginia and the coal fields of Alabama before settling in Hampton in 1892.

Plecker took special interest in delivering babies. He became concerned about the high mortality rate among poor mothers and began keeping records and searching for ways to improve birthing.

Public health was first being recognized as a government concern at the turn of the last century, and Plecker was a pioneer. In 1902, he became health officer for Elizabeth City County (today, Hampton). He recorded details of more than 98 percent of the births and deaths in the county – an amazing feat during a time when most people were born and died at home. When lawmakers established the state Bureau of Vital Statistics in 1912, they asked Plecker to run it.

Plecker's first 12 years on the job were groundbreaking and marked by goodwill. He educated midwives of all races on modern birthing techniques and cut the 5 percent death rate for black mothers almost in half. He developed an incubator – a combination of a laundry basket, dirt, a thermometer and a kerosene lamp – that anyone could make in an instant. Concerned by a high incidence of syphilitic blindness in black and Indian babies, he distributed silver nitrate to be put in the eyes of newborns.

Plecker was all work. He did not seek friendship. Although married most of his life, he did not have children. He listed his hobbies as “books and birds.”

“He was a man you could sometimes respect and admire, but never love,” said Russell E. Booker Jr., who grew up in Plecker’s neighborhood, delivered his newspaper and worked in the Bureau of Vital Statistics from 1960 to 1994, spending the last 12 years as director. “He was a very rigid man,” Booker added. “I don’t know of anyone who ever saw him smile.”

Plecker was tall, bone-thin, had wavy, white hair that was neatly combed and a trim mustache. He took a bus to work and lunched every day on just an apple.

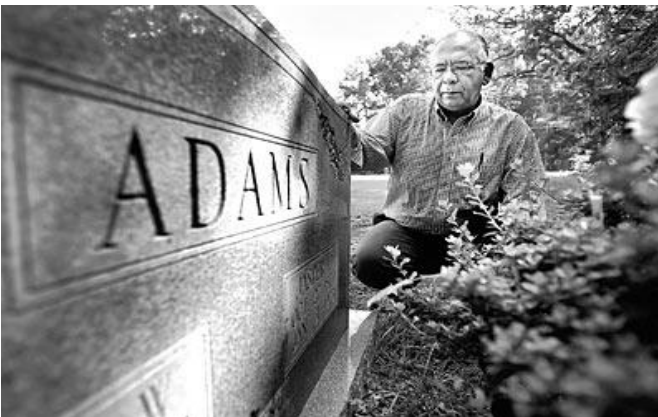
He was a miserly taskmaster. Plecker scraped glue pots, mixed the gunk with water and sent it back to employees for use. Booker said that, according to office legend, “You didn’t get a new pencil until you turned in your old one, and it better not be longer than an inch and a quarter.”

Plecker never looked before crossing streets. “He just expected the cars to stop for him,” said Booker, who still lives in Richmond. “One time a woman grabbed him just as he was about to be hit, and he laid her out like she’d just touched God.”

Plecker was a devout Presbyterian. He helped establish churches around the state and supported fundamentalist missionaries. Plecker belonged to a conservative Southern branch of the church that believed the Bible was infallible and condoned segregation. Members of Plecker’s branch maintained that God flooded the earth and destroyed Sodom to express his anger at racial interbreeding.

“Let us turn a deaf ear to those who would interpret Christian brotherhood as racial equality,” Plecker wrote in a 1925 essay.

Part 2: The black-and-white world of Walter Ashby Plecker



Kenneth Adams, chief of the Upper Mattaponi tribe, visits his grandfather’s grave. The worst thing about Plecker’s work, he said, was that it tore families apart. “People just left,” he said, to seek out life in other states that did not deny Indians their heritage. Lisa Billings

Plecker described himself as a man of science. And at the turn of the 20th century, eugenics was internationally heralded as the thinking man’s science. The term “eugenics” was coined in 1883 by English scientist Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, a year after Darwin’s death. Galton defined it as the science of “race improvement.” It was viewed as a practical application of Darwin’s theories of evolution and natural selection.

The early aim of Galton and his followers was to promote selective marriages to eliminate hereditary

disorders. It wasn't long, however, before they focused on perpetuating a superior class of humans.

As the science swept across the Atlantic, it picked up more ominous tones. Eugenacists began espousing mandatory sterilization of "wicked" and mentally retarded people to eliminate their bloodlines.

All the major colleges, including the University of Virginia, taught the science. It was embraced by such great minds as Alexander Graham Bell, George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. Margaret Sanger won support for legalizing contraception by arguing it would lower the birth rate of undesirables. Winston Churchill unsuccessfully proposed sterilization laws for Great Britain in 1910. As governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson signed that state's first sterilization law in 1911. The next year, he was elected president. Virginia's gentry embraced the fad. Eugenics was the perfect way to deal with race and the underclass.

Walter Ashby Plecker

"Virginians thought of themselves as more progressive than their neighbors to the south," said Gregory M. Dorr, a University of Alabama history professor who is writing a book on eugenics. "There was a feeling that we don't need to do lynching or the KKK. We're not savage. We can handle our problems in a rational way."

The leader of the state movement was John Powell of Richmond, an internationally acclaimed pianist and composer who would work closely with Plecker for more than a quarter of a century. Powell was rich, well-connected and a compelling speaker.

Plecker stayed behind the scenes, supplying Powell with copies of all the major correspondence of his office and drafting racial separation bills for the legislature's consideration.

Their work paid off in 1924 when the General Assembly passed the Racial Integrity Act and a mandatory sterilization law that would be invoked 8,300 times over the next 55 years.

Although 31 states would pass eugenics laws, none was tougher than Virginia's. The Racial Integrity Act essentially narrowed race classifications on birth and marriage certificates to two choices: "white person" or "colored." The law defined a white as one with no trace of black blood. A white person could have no more than a 1/16th trace of Indian blood – an exception, much to Plecker's regret, legislators made to appease the descendants of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, who were considered among Virginia's first families.

The act forbade interracial marriage and lying about race on registration forms. Violators faced felony convictions and a year in prison.

Plecker strongly supported sterilization laws, arguing that feeble-minded whites were prone to mate with Indians and blacks. He had no role in administering the law, however.

The Racial Integrity Act, on the other hand, was his to enforce, and Plecker went about it obsessively. Gov. E. Lee Trinkle, a year after signing the act, asked Plecker to ease

up on the Indians and not “embarrass them any more than possible.” Plecker fired back an angry letter.

“I am unable to see how it is working any injustice upon them or humiliation for our office to take a firm stand against their intermarriage with white people, or to the preliminary steps of recognition as Indians with permission to attend white schools and to ride in white coaches,” Plecker wrote.

The governor retreated.

Plecker saw everything in black and white. There were no other races. There was no such thing as a Virginia Indian. The tribes, he said, had become a “mongrel” mixture of black and American Indian blood.

Their existence greatly disturbed Plecker. He was convinced that mulatto offspring would slowly seep into the white race. “Like rats when you’re not watching,” they “have been sneaking in their birth certificates through their own midwives, giving either Indian or white racial classification,” Plecker wrote.

He called them “the breach in the dike.” They had to be stopped.

Many who came into Plecker’s cross hairs were acting with pure intentions. They registered as white or Indian because that’s how their parents identified themselves. Plecker seemed to delight in informing them they were “colored,” citing genealogical records dating back to the early 1800s that he said his office possessed. His tone was cold and final.

In one letter, Plecker informed a Pennsylvania woman that the Virginia man about to become her son-in-law had black blood. “You have to set the thing straight now and we hope your daughter can see the seriousness of the whole matter and dismiss this young man without any more ado,” he wrote.

In another missive, he rejected a Lynchburg woman’s claim that her newborn was white. The father, he told her in a letter, had traces of “negro” blood.

“This is to inform you that this is a mulatto child and you cannot pass it off as white,” he wrote.

“You will have to do something about this matter and see that this child is not allowed to mix with white children. It cannot go to white schools and can never marry a white person in Virginia.

“It is a horrible thing.”

Plecker’s no-nonsense approach made him a celebrity within the eugenics movement, which was increasingly losing support among scientists and becoming a platform for white supremacy. He spoke around the country, was widely published and wrote to every governor in the nation to urge passage of racial laws just as tough as Virginia’s. He dined at the New York home of Harry H. Laughlin, the nation’s leading eugenics advocate and an unabashed Nazi sympathizer.

In 1932, Plecker gave a keynote speech at the Third International Conference on Eugenics in New York. Among those in attendance was Ernst Rudin of Germany who, 11 months later, would help write Hitler’s eugenics law.

In 1935, Plecker wrote to Walter Gross, the director of Germany's Bureau of Human Betterment and Eugenics. He outlined Virginia's racial purity laws and asked to be put on a mailing list for bulletins from Gross' department. Plecker complimented the Third Reich for sterilizing 600 children in Algeria who were born to German women and black men. "I hope this work is complete and not one has been missed," he wrote. "I sometimes regret that we have not the authority to put some measures in practice in Virginia."

Plecker wrote to Gross on state stationery. He sold copies of eugenics books in his office. He was occasionally rebuked for turning official publications into diatribes against racial interbreeding and mailing them at government expense. And when the Racial Integrity Act failed to meet his needs, Plecker stretched it.

He pressured superintendents to remove children from white schools based on complaints that they had "negro" features. "As to deciding the point of race, you and the sheriff, and any other intelligent citizen of your community, are as capable of judging from the appearance of the child as the most learned scientist," Plecker wrote one superintendent. "There is absolutely no blood or other test to determine the question."

Plecker demanded the removal of bodies from white cemeteries. He tried to evict a set of twins from a Presbyterian orphanage because they were illegitimate and, therefore, the "chances are 10-1 they are of negro blood."

Plecker maintained that all of his racial designations were based on impeccable records. There was, however, a secret Plecker revealed to only a few trusted allies: A lot of the time he was just guessing.

He acknowledged the sham when a Richmond attorney questioned his authority to change the birth certificate of a woman classified as an Indian before 1924. Plecker quietly admitted he had no such power and rescinded his designation of the woman as "colored."

Plecker fretted that he would lose his hold on Indians if word of his retreat got out. "In reality I have been doing a good deal of bluffing, knowing all the while that it could never be legally sustained," he wrote to his cohort, John Powell. "This is the first time that my hand has been absolutely called."

The setback was temporary, however. The attorney kept quiet. And Plecker began developing his ultimate weapon against the Indians.

In January 1943, he sent a list of common surnames from each of the state's tribes to local officials where the clans lived. He instructed them that anyone with those names must be classified and treated as "negro."

Today, the Indians call it Plecker's hit list. It was the last indignity for many of them, the act that convinced them there was no prospect for happiness in Virginia. It was the reason Lacy Hearl's relatives pulled out for other states. Why she got married in Maryland, which recognized her heritage. Why her son couldn't get into a Boy Scout troop.

Hearl's maiden name – Branham – was on the list. Although Branhams and most other Monacans lived among themselves and attended an Indian school, many of them had light complexions and could move freely. Suddenly, their freedom was gone.

"You had to lie about your name and hope the person at the door didn't know you," she said.

Hearl had always loved going to the movies and dances. That stopped. She could no longer get in. "It was the end of my family," said Hearl, now 74. "I was lonely. It's sad that a family has to depart from each other just because of a name." Other tribes tell similar stories. "The worst thing about Plecker is how he screwed up the community," said Kenneth Adams, the chief of the Upper Mattaponi. "People just left."

Indian schools did not go beyond eighth grade. White schools were off-limits. Black schools were not an option for most Indians because attending them would be a concession to Plecker's racial classifications.

"We were the third race in a two-race state," said Stephen Adkins, chief of the Chickahominy tribe. "I remember once traveling with my father and we pulled into a gas station because I had to go to the bathroom and there was one bathroom marked 'white' and one bathroom marked 'colored.' I said, 'Dad, what do I do?'"

After his retirement, Plecker planned to write a book about the decline of the white race. Before he had a chance, he stepped into traffic without looking.

Legend has it that he was hit by a bus. "I know it's kind of cruel to say this, but I hope the last thing he saw was an Indian driving that bus," said Sue Elliott, Hearl's daughter.

The truth is that he was hit by a car driven by Kenneth R. Berrell, whose racial origins have fallen into oblivion. Plecker died in a hospital two hours later. It was 1947.

Plecker's racial records were largely ignored after 1959, when his handpicked successor retired. Virginia schools were fully integrated in 1963 and, four years later, the state's ban on interracial marriage was ruled unconstitutional. In 1975, the General Assembly repealed the rest of the Racial Integrity Act.

During the past two decades, Virginia has tried to erase Plecker's legacy. It has established councils on Indian affairs and has conferred official state recognition on eight tribes, a designation that provides no privileges. But Indian leaders say recognition equals respect.

In 1997, then-Gov. George F. Allen simplified procedures for people to correct inaccurate birth records. Hearl had her race changed from black to Indian.

"I know who I am and I'm proud of it," she said. The going has been tougher in Washington, where Virginia Indians are trying to join 562 tribes around the country that are federally recognized. The Bush administration, while sensitive to Plecker's destruction of records, has been unwilling to ease application rules.

Allen, now a U.S. senator, is again championing the Indians' cause. The Republican has authored legislation that would bypass bureaucratic requirements and allow

Congress to federally recognize the tribes. Allen, during a Senate hearing last year, lamented Virginia's racist past.

"Virginia Indians were not extended the rights offered to other U.S. citizens, and the years of discrimination and coercive policies took a tremendous toll," he said.

The bill has been approved by a key Senate committee and may come up for a floor vote later this year.

The legislation faces major opposition in the House of Representatives, however, where Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Fairfax County, has raised concern that federal recognition would open the door to Indian-run casinos in Virginia. The tribes, most of them devout Christians, say they oppose gaming. Allen and Gov. Mark R. Warner say there are many safeguards that would prevent casinos from opening in the Old Dominion.

The Virginia tribes are moving decisively. Six have banded together to ask Congress for help. They have brought Plecker's story to Capitol Hill, hired a lobbyist and meet regularly to plan strategy, which includes deciding whether to participate in the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown settlement in 2007.

Indian leaders say that's a big change from the days not long ago when all of the tribes went separate ways.

"We have a bond now," Adkins, the Chickahominy chief, said. "It's kind of ironic, but Plecker has made us stronger."

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Information for this story was gathered from interviews, books on the history of eugenics and the collection of Plecker's writings on file in the John Powell papers, kept in the special collections department of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia.